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Signature 

Question Presented by Dissertation Committee-

Discuss contemporary definitions and conceptions of "new media." What are the benefits and limitations of such definitions? What role do "participation" and "interconnectivity" play in them? What has been the effect of digital technologies on the relationship between the visual artist, the viewer, and the art object itself?

Answer by Vaughn Whitney Garland -

> *Our furniture includes iPods and plasma displays, our skills include texting and googling, we are endowed, we are expert, we see information in the foreground. But it has always been there. It pervaded our ancestor's world, too, taking forms from solid to ethereal, granite gravestones and the whispers of courtiers. The punched card, the cash register, the nineteenth-century Difference Engine, the wires of telegraphy all played their parts in weaving the spiderweb of information to which we cling. Each new information technology, in its own time, set off blooms in storage and transmissions. From the printing press came new species of information organizers: dictionaries, cyclopedias, almanacs-compendiums of words, classifiers of facts, trees of knowledge. Hardly any information technology goes obsolete. Each new one throws its predecessors into relief.*[1]

Each day the amount of extant technology grows exponentially, it becomes faster, more compact, more democratic, and more user friendly. We use gadgets to carry out the procedures of daily life and to advance or document who and what we are. Yet, due to the speed of which current technology changes, and to the theories that try to keep up with that rapid growth, it is easy to see that over the past several years our notions and perception of how current technologies are extensions of past technologies get lost in the excitement for what is "new." In trying to understand how we communicate, make new works of art, and document how we interact with each other, the term "new media" has

[1] Gleick. (2011) 12

been used and misused. Even though new advancements in digital media may in fact be new media, it is not enough to say that new media and new media artworks began with the invention of the computer. I argue that what we understand as "old" media could, in fact, have been new media. Contemporary theory should consider all the ways in which artworks encourage collaboration with technology, and separate theoretical distinctions should be made for each category of mediated work.

Many outspoken theorists who have been instrumental in defining our perception of new media make a clear distinction—separating the world along technological lines. According to this line of thought, new media, by definition, begins with digitization, the development of computers, and the appearance of code. The digital computer is defined as encompassing three parts: information, operation, and control.[2] Leading new media theorist Lev Manovich posits that new media directly emerges from computer culture. He suggests that all new media works are in fact products of the computer age and should be viewed in relationship to the digital program. "New media are the cultural objects which use digital computer technology for distribution and exhibition."[3] While Manovich builds an argument for new media out of the advancements and concerns of cinema, Manovich's ideas are equally applicable when applied to computers in their capacity to present mediated, collaged, and programmed data. Additionally, Manovich suggests that computers mimic what it means to be real because society is built on codes and programmed language. "More generally, extending what I proposed in my book, I could say that two basic ways in which computers model reality—through data structures and algorithms—can also be applied to media once it is represented digitally. In other words,

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[2] Gleick (2011) 254
[3] Manovich (2003) 17

given that new media is digital data controlled by particular "cultural" software, it makes sense to think of any new media object in terms of particular data structures and/or particular algorithms it embodies."[4]

According to Manovich, new media artists penetrate past the surface of the object to reveal what is essential to the subject and its production. What is important to Manovich's logic is that the viewer interacts with the "program" of the work in much the same way Walter Benjamin describes interaction in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction." For Benjamin, the object's "aura" is lost because the cinematographer shattered the space between object and audience. Benjamin's criticism of mediated works of art stems from technology becoming a way in which artists hide behind the program, therefore extending past the surface of the object. The absence of space between artist/audience redirects the viewer to look into the work of art, removing the "aura" of the work of art as an object in itself. Benjamin saw that technology, like cinema and photography, removed what was once seen as the essential characteristic for art, redirecting the audience to take up space within the work of art, not outside it. "Photography and Phonography…transform the very notion of an artwork's 'presence in time and space.' The 'original' work is wrenched from its natural time-space location." [5] Benjamin explains this change in space by describing how a magician/painter interacts with his/her subject in comparison to a surgeon/ cinematographer. Benjamin's suggests that a painter acts as a magician who displays the final surface and not the procedure or production behind the act. On the other hand, much like a surgeon who "penetrates" the patient, the cinematographer breaks the surface of the object in order to reveal what is

[4] Manovich (2003) 17
[5] Hansen and Mitchell (2010) 104

inside. "The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrated deeply into its tissue. The images obtained by each differ enormously. The painter's is a total image, whereas that of the cinematographer is piecemeal, its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law." [6] Manovich proposes the loss of space between object and audience as what separates old media from new media. For Manovich, new media asks the audience to look past the surface, to decode the programmable computer scripts.

The digital image works in much the same way as the cinematic image; the framed image directs the viewer into the work of art. The digital image becomes a space filled with information. It is forever linked to a "neighbor," a trace image defined in part by relation. The digital image calls into question the presence of external information--to the system from which it is made. The digital image is made out of the computer language, the ones and zeroes of codes. Once the image is digitized it enters into a language foreign from the creators hands and becomes data. The digital image transforms the viewer into a reader or code breaker that shares responsibility with the program that takes the code and presents it back as a visual document.

> Unlike an analog image, the computer or digital image does not comprise a static cut into the flux of the real; instead, it captures a virtual block of information. Moreover, since 'each point in the [computer] image is fact has an infinite number of possible neighbors,' the form in which we perceive this digital image—as a two-dimensional representation of a particular configuration of this virtual block of information—is purely arbitrary, unconnected by any analogical relation to the numerical reality it expresses. Following its digitization, the image becomes akin to a text composed of individual letter, one that is, strictly speaking, unreadable.[7]

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[6] Benjamin (2008) 35

[7] Hansen (2004) 72

Unlike an autonomous work of art, the digital image is a path, a possibility to break the code of analogous images. Like the Manovich's cinematic image, the digital image is a reference to the real, one that appears as a sign to the code. Since the viewer needs the program in order to recognize the image the viewer is transformed into an active participant, one that shares in the production of the work of art. In this way, artists, users, and technologies create a community in which each participant relies on the other in order to decipher the code. The digital image creates a place where the viewer pierces the surface in order to uncover the code, asking the viewer to work with the system.

> New media change our concept of what an image is—because they turn a viewer into an active user. As a result, an illusionist image is no longer something a subject simply looks at, comparing it with memories of repressed reality to judge its reality effect. The new media image is something the user actively goes into, zooming in or clicking on individual parts with the assumption that they contain hyperlinks…the image becomes interactive, that is, it now functions as an interface between a user and a computer or other devices.[8]

The argument that surrounds how an object works in relationship with the viewer has produced various theories, including an understanding of Modernist art, Minimal art, and now digital media. With all these debates the construction of the work of art as a socially produced collaboration becomes a vehicle for collective creativity and shared experience and at the same time comments on how we view the *object d'art*. Many of the most important conversations that take place between artist, viewer, audience, user, and technology rests on the presence of a body in relation to the artwork. If we were to agree with Benjamin's removal of an aura, then the viewer/audience/user would share in the meaning and the production of the work of art as bodily objects. The shifting of presence, away from the art object as a wholly responsible entity for exchange, to a

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[8] Manovich (2001) 183

shared interaction on all participants replaces ownership with collaboration. Thus, the body becomes a prerequisite to how the individual enters into new media in opposition to or in collaboration with technology. Once the body becomes a property to address what is real, in a situation where that real collaborates with the digital, the body's framing function becomes subject. One of the current hopes is for new media is to challenge what is real, what is body, and what is digital—a hope exemplified by technology like virtual reality. In VR the body becomes a direct vehicle to enter the digital space, but is completely removed once the digital world takes hold. Since Manovich's theory of new media relies on decoding by a computer, the body becomes a way to detach and locate the object/viewer. Much like the audience who sits in from of a screen, the body gives way for a framing of the digital work of art. Thus, the body becomes a way to isolate and interrogate media, to frame the image. The presence of the body, in relation to the digital, continues to remind the viewer that they are held within the system, that they are entering a second real.

> It is not simply that the image provides a tool for the user to control the 'infoscape' of contemporary material culture, as Manovich suggests, but rather that the 'image' has itself become a process and, as such, has become irreducibly bound up with the activity of the body. Thus, rather than simply abandoning it to its own obsolescence or transforming it into a vehicle for interfacing with information, we must fundamentally reconfigure the image. Specifically, we must accept that the image, rather than finding instantiation in a privileged technical form (including the computer interface), now demarcated the very process through which the body, in conjunction with the various apparatuses for rendering information perceptible, gives form to or *in-forms* information. In sum, the image can no longer be restricted to the level of surface appearance, but must be extended to encompass the entire process by which information is made perceivable through embodied experience. This is what I propose to call the *digital image*.[9]

[9] Hansen (2004) 10

Mark Hansen views new media in a much different way than Manovich. Hansen suggests that new media is in fact two things, "a qualitatively new kind of media and a quality of all media."[10] Hansen's theory of the dual nature of media allows that old media can be viewed as products of their own time, and within a continuum are also related to the current new media. Within the context of Hansen's explanation of new media, we can say that new media technologies can be represented by a historical line of achievements. This allows media critics, historians, and theorists to look at media through social constructions—how society used a particular technology to advance media, and a historical record that reveals a past and a future. Unlike Manovich, where new media just appeared with the creation of the computer, Hansen's theory of new media is an open-ended set of parameters in which to talk about media and technology used throughout history.

Media oracle Marshall McLuhan looked at media as "extensions" of the body as the reason and progression of technology and media. In his landmark book, *Understanding Media*, McLuhan suggests that media is directly related to how we, as a society, see ourselves. McLuhan understood that the media we use are in fact assisting us and changing how we view ourselves. The extension of media, from our body, builds an individual who is both human and technology. "Physiologically, man in the normal use of technology (or his variously extended body) is perpetually modified by it and in turn finds even new ways of modifying this technology. Man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to

[10] Hansen (2010) 172

evolve every new forms."[11] But, for McLuhan, there is a negative effect in man's dependence and love for technology, which is an argument that presently continues. Many critics of new technology, and even some old forms of technology, exclaim that media takes away from people, replacing human activities with false forms of action. These criticisms suggest that media will manipulate what it means to be a person. We see this same discourse occurring with various new media technologies, including Jaron Lanier's criticism of Internet communities. For some, technology becomes a place of blame and worry, while for other it is a tool of untold freedom and accomplishments. The Greek word Techné, or technology, places a learned skill in relation to the body. Once the body recognizes how to harness an act that body has successfully learned how to create that act over. But, for some, once the act is mediated the original body act is lessened or forgotten. Take for example Plato's worry that writing would take away from memory, that if one were to write something down then they would not need to try and remember it. For Plato, orality was a primary act and any technology that would mimic speech would expunge the knowledge that was learned to accomplish the original act. McLuhan sees this worry in slightly a different way. McLuhan readily proposes that the body goes numb in the face of technology. But in that numbing of the body something else happens. He sees a knowledge that is more aware of the original act because it has a second, more perceptive, act working in its place. It is an uprooting of the medium in question that is placed against the body, which causes a remediation of the medium:

> The principal of numbness comes into play with electric technology, as with any other. We have to numb our central nervous system when it is extended and exposed, or we will die. Thus the age of anxiety and of electric media is also the age of the unconscious and of apathy. But it is strikingly the age of consciousness

[11] McLuhan (1994) 46

> of the unconscious, in addition. With our central nervous system strategically numbered, the tasks of conscious awareness and order are transferred to the physical life of man, so that for the first time he has become aware of technology as an extension of his physical body.[12]

Within the context of the remediation between man and technology, McLuhan proposes one of his most important descriptions of media. In "The Medium is the Message*"* McLuhan proposes media can be created to remediate, address, and give content to previous media. For example, the printing press was created to mediate scribal culture, thus giving content to written culture. Here, the content of previous media is created by the appropriation of the media that has mediated past media. This understanding of media comes with further extensions of the body. "The personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology."[13] McLuhan's message focuses on media in two ways, through the extensions of the body and through the extensions of media. Yet, some media start as information and do not need to be used as a message. Take for example the light bulb. For McLuhan that medium is simply information and unless used as a way of making language not considered a remediation:

> The eclectic light is pure information. It is medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the 'content' of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph…The railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions, creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure.[14]

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[12] McLuhan (1994) 47
[13] McLuhan (1994) 7
[14] McLuhan (1994) 8

The computer has become "the most powerful exteriorization of memory technology in the history of media."[15] Though the expanding interconnectivity between computer and body continues to nurture media theory, the body's placement in relation to the work of art did not start with the computer and it is not specifically new media. In order to comment on the current concepts of new media, including its embrace on interconnectivity, participation, and authorship, it is imperative to look at some of the theoretical arguments in the twentieth century that formed the language we now use to describe the functions of participant vs. object.

In the debates about aesthetics, culture, and media, Clement Greenberg and Theodor W. Adorno appear frequently. Greenberg and Adorno championed a high modernist aesthetic that connected the avant-garde and the cultured elite. The simultaneous emergence of popular culture and new aesthetic philosophies, in terms of a national, social, and cultural identity, brought Adorno and Greenberg's concepts to life. Despite what is typically thought, it was Adorno, not Greenberg, who began the discussion concerning the decline of high culture due to the expanding reliance on media and technology to make works of art.

Three years after Adorno's first article critiquing Jazz, Adorno published his harshest criticism of jazz in 1936. This article could be considered the earliest dialectic on the decline of high art due to an advancing power with new media and technology. Adorno saw Jazz as a threat to fine art because it relied on mass culture and mass culture media artifacts, including cinema. Not long after that, in 1939, Clement Greenberg initiated his own criticism of mass culture and the decline of fine art in media's hand with

[15] Hansen and Mitchell (2010) xvii

the milestone article "Avant-garde and Kitsch." Both Adorno and Greenberg saw a problem with the power of media, especially cinema. For that reason they established what some call *Media Specificity*, or more specifically in Greenberg's case the philosophy know as Greenberg Formalism. Medium specificity called artists to look within their own discipline of work and construct new works of art that are natural to the tool and materials for which they used. For Greenberg, and for Michael Fried afterwards, media specificity welcomed a "purity" of materials, shunning remediation or cross mediation. The reasons why these ideas of medium specificity mean so much to us now are twofold. The first is that medium specificity called on works of art to be viewed as independent, autonomous, objects that have an explicit language and material of its own. The second rationale calls into question what happened in rejection of Greenberg, where artists started creating multimedia works of art. As soon as Greenberg established medium specificity as a forefront Modernist aesthetic, artists started experimenting with media, and technology, to challenge the Modernist definition of high art. These new media artists looked to technology as possible ways to make new art through collaboration. Artists working in communities like Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at MIT relied on technology, and remediation, as ways to approach works of art. Here, artists collaborated with others and used technology as a tool of research and creativity. Yet, the erosion of media specificity did not just happen within community of collaborating artists, it also happened in the autonomous work of art. One of the rejections of media specificity—that materials could not interact with materials from other disciplines—came in the form of collage art. Here, the collage integrated media of different materials and used them in the

same body. Even though collage art hit its height as a rejection of Greenberg, collage was an already refined and significant way of making works of art. Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp were well aware of the power of collage:

> The idea that art might be defined by formal distinction between traditional studio practice and mass media began to erode with the invention of collage practices. Pablo Picasso's 1913 *Still Life with Chair Caning* contains actual rope, thus challenging distinctions between presentation and representation. Other works he produced in the 1910s include torn newspaper, wallpaper, and other mass-produced printed materials. Not only were mass media and entertainments now subjects for fine art, but mass-media artifacts were materially incorporated into artworks. At the same time, principles of composition, harmony, proposition, and beauty were attacked or eroded.[16]

The modernist art movement revolved around specific rules, one of which that a work remained an autonomous object and would carry an original autonomous "presence." This meant that the *object d'art* stood on it's own, without instruction by a viewer. Much of the modernist aesthetic relied on the surface of the artwork—that the material created meaning for the work. The material did not ask, nor want, the viewer to add anything else to the surface, but to remain a pristine place of observation. Here, the modernist's artwork is defined by its own properties, not the functions that a spectator would bring to the experience of viewing. "What characterizes modern art is an insistence that the viewer keep coming back to the surface or, in extreme cases, an attempt to hold the viewer at the surface indefinitely."[17]

Within the context of the modernist's principles, art critic and historian Michael Fried wrote in 1967 a condemnation of Minimalism. In "Art and Objecthood" Fried discounts any physical interaction between object and viewer. While Minimalism could be understood as a final point of ending for Greenberg's Formalism, where the object

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[16] Drucker (2010) 10
[17] Bolter and Grusin (1999) 41

becomes formalized so much that it becomes an object of material, Minimalism was a theatrical engagement between the body and the work of art. Fried saw Minimalism as a type of spectacle that transformed the object on the wall or floor into which would direct viewers to place themselves in relation to the work. This caused a shift of importance and autonomy of the work of art into an experience that included the viewer as a participant.

Since Fried hypothesized a distinction between the work of art as an autonomous object against the viewing experience as a challenge to the pure experience of viewing, French theorist and founding member of Situationists International propositioned that the whole experience of society, which was built on images and image use, is in itself a spectacle. While, much of Debord's 1967 *The Society of the Spectacle* is a critique on popular culture and media, it did open up the floodgates to the vast possibilities of making works of art. Debord sees media as creating a new "real," one in which was taking over the, "the spectacle…is the inversion of life."[18] What is important for art and for aesthetics is that Debord isolated the act of viewing and engaging as a focus for creativity and criticism. By engaging in the viewing, by participating, the viewer becomes actor and the engagement becomes a subject of critique. Once inside the critique the participant, the artist, could use what is available to that specific engagement as criticism of the experience and the larger system, which Debord called the spectacle. This criticism from within is what Debord referred to as *d'etournement*. *D'etournement* is a way for the viewer to fight back, to act from within a system. "We need images of action, images of the true reality or images that can immediately be inverted into their

[18] Ranciere (2009) 85

true reality, in order to show us that the mere fact of being a spectator, the mere fact of viewing images, is a bad thing." [19]

What is critical for an understanding and evaluation of new media, especially new media in the digital platform and new media through interconnectivity and interactivity or remediation, is that Debord, Fried, Greenberg, and Adorno revealed the functions of the spectacle/spectator with the creative experience and or object making. These theories on new media, on technology, and medium specificity offers new media theorists a way to look at works of art as autonomous and at the same time as collaborations between participating bodies.

In order to create a *d'etournement* of new forms of media, it is imperative that new media artists work internally and externally. Instead of treating all digital media as new media, and all analog media as old media, new media critics, historians, philosophers, and artists who use new media as material for critique or creation should look as the digital as both a new media, and a link to old media. Digital media should not be sees as a complete break from old media, as Manovich proposes, "new media is old media that has been digitized".[20] New media is not uniquely digital. Furthermore, digital media is not transcendent of, but a progression from past media. What I think Manovich meant to say is that digital media is old media that has been digitized. This would allow properties of digital media to be created out of past media. Situating digital media as a transformative experience that is only subject to computational analysis rejects new media's relationship to old media and media theories. "Digital media can never reach this state of transcendence, but will instead function in a constant dialectic with earlier

[19] Ranciere (2009) 87
[20] Manovich (2001) 47

media, precisely as each earlier medium functions when it was introduced. Once again, what is new about digital media lies in their particular strategies for remediating television, film, photography, and painting. Repurposing as remediation is both what is 'unique to digital world' and what denies the possibility of that uniqueness."[21]

In order to discuss how new media compares to old media, we must look at the properties that are perceived as unique to new media and to digital media. Interconnectivity, democracy, and participation are banner words that are used daily to spread how new media will make out lives better. These same ideas seep into the ways in which we make works of art, interactions with the larger world. New media, and new media artists, are quick to say that technology give us more freedom. While I think that this statement is partly true I think it critical to recognize how current media mimics old media in many ways.

[21] Bolter and Grusin (1999) 50

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